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EDU 402

Background Statement

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I come from a rural part of Western Maine, in which the majority of the population is part of the working class. Of course, there are some exceptions, and there are families that are more middle-to-upper class as well as a sizeable number that fall beneath the poverty line. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the school district in which I came from did not serve many students that came from families of doctors and lawyers; the majority of my peers came from families like my own, who had teachers, small-business owners, or service industry workers as parents (for example). If I had to make a generalization, I would say that my school district expected the majority of its students to end up with jobs similar to those of their parents’ and the rest of the community. This usually meant that we were expected to attain at least some level of post-secondary education, whether it was a four-year program or a two-year associates or technical degree. However, our district also provided vocational programs for students who wanted to enter the workforce right after high school, which was also common within our community, hence the working-class majority and the consequential expectations of the local business world. At the least, a high school diploma was expected of us.

My high school was a bit different from the elementary and middle schools within the district because it served as both a public school and a private school, drawing in rather wealthy and high-achieving students from all over the world. This contrast in student demographics made my high school a very unique place, and many times the boarding students were held to higher standards than the “day” (public school) students because they were paying big money for the education that the school had to offer. For example, when I was accepted to Cornell, my teachers made a big deal out of it because it “wasn’t often” that a local student who spent her entire life in our school district got accepted to an Ivy. Such accomplishments were usually reserved for the boarding/international students.

My parents always had high expectations of me as a student.  Because they were both college graduates (my mother has a master’s degree in education and my father has two bachelor’s degrees) and teachers themselves, they understood the importance of a quality education and wanted the same for me.  My mother began reading to me when I was just a week old baby, and continued to do so every night all the way through the 5th grade, and I quickly developed a love for books.  My parents also constantly gave me outlets for creativity, questioning, and self-expression so that my education would expand beyond the walls of the classroom.  I am ever grateful for their efforts to make learning a regular and natural part of my life, because it helped me to see school as an extension of my education as a human being and not a burden or something that I “just had to do.”  Whenever I did well in school, my parents were proud of me, but they did not give me rewards or praise me extensively for getting good grades; instead, I simply knew that it was expected of me to do well. My parents therefore taught me to be intrinsically motivated, proving to me that hard work is the basis for a successful life, and so I have always been able to set high standards for myself without relying on extrinsic motivation. In fact, I consider myself a “Type A” personality, and sometimes I am teased by my close friends about the amount of pressure I put on myself. Therefore, I have very high expectations for my own education.

Because my high school was an independent school, or part private and part public, my teachers were not required to have a teaching certification in order to work there.  While many of them had attended college to become teachers, some of them certainly did not, and it showed in their teaching methods.  These teachers spent most of class time standing at the front of the room and lecturing while we (the students) took notes as rapidly as we could. Other teachers, however, were more attentive to the differing needs and learning styles of the students and would provide us with a variety of activities and opportunities to show our understanding of subject matter. My favorite teachers were always my English and science teachers because they were the most creative in their methods. These classes tended to be discussion-based, group oriented, and hands-on, which was good for me because I have never learned well in lecture-based classes, and consequently these were the classes I struggled the most in. I have a difficult time retaining information when it is simply “fed” to me. Instead, I need the opportunity to practice what I have learned on a regular basis, whether it is through in-class, group activities, discussions, or placed into meaningful context and without having high-stakes attached to my performance (at least initially, until I am confident in my ability). I need to feel comfortable making mistakes. The teacher who had the greatest impact on me implemented all of these strategies, and it was in his sophomore honors English class that I feel I grew the most. We also had regular student/teacher conferences, and he was the first teacher to really point out my strength of writing and encourage me to pursue it in greater depths. I am forever grateful for his belief in me, and it makes me want to be able to do the same for my own students by bringing their strengths to light, believing in them, and setting the bar high. These, along with the instructional methods I mentioned above, are all qualities of superior educator.

All the way back to elementary school, I remember being in the more “advanced” classes and groups in everything besides math, which I was atrocious at (and still am). In elementary school, we had peer groups for each subject, and I remember knowing that I was in the “dumb” math group but the “smart” language arts group. This pattern followed me into middle school and eventually high school, when we had different teachers and classrooms for different subjects. Because my schools were always on the smaller side, I was placed with a lot of the same peers all the way through high school. Once I reached high school, I took primarily honors and AP courses in everything besides math. I felt that I received a high-quality education for the most part, particularly because I was successful in my classes and received recognition for it. I was accepted into good colleges and graduated with high honors, so how could I complain? I have also realized, however, that I was fortunate to be in the classes I was placed in because all of the students in those classes were like me: Type A, hardworking, driven, a bit nerdy, and genuinely *wanted* to be in school. Looking back, I realize that I was very segregated from the rest of the student body, or the students who didn’t share the same qualities and strengths as I did. At the time, I was glad for this, because I became very close with my like-minded peers and did not have to worry about being distracted by students who did not share the same passion for learning that we had. However, I feel as though the tracking system that my district followed also kept me from experiencing its true diversity. Now, as an education major, I am torn as to whether or not I agree with this structure (a tracking system), as it definitely has its pros and cons. Not only does it segregate students, but I am also afraid that it prevents lower-achieving students from pushing themselves to work harder and it attaches privilege to higher-achieving students. However, I was successful within it, so it makes it hard for me to disagree with it completely. I would like to learn more about how it works for students who were tracked differently than I was.

I am confident that my personal background as a student and as the daughter of two educators will have a positive effect on me as I approach teaching as a professional career. I have witnessed the struggles, frustrations, and victories that my parents have achieved, so I know what to expect from the profession and will accept challenges without shying away. I have also experienced a unique and diverse educational setting within my school district and have been a peer to a variety of students from all sorts of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. I have attended three different colleges, and while post-secondary education is certainly quite different from secondary education, each of the three colleges I’ve attended differ immensely in terms of class structure and diversity within the student body; therefore, my experience as a college student has taught me a lot about diversity and my own personal learning styles (and those of others).

I always said I never wanted to be a teacher after witnessing what my parents went through (long, exhausting days, little pay, frustration), but as I grew older, I was how rewarding their profession really is. Both of them still have students that stay in touch because of the positive impact they were able to have on their lives. Similarly, I have teachers that I continue to keep in touch with years after graduating. I am also a “people person” and I have strong communication skills and enjoy listening to others and helping them solve problems. These factors, along with the desire to change lives like my parents and my own teachers have, ultimately made me choose the teaching profession. As a teacher, I hope to gain a sense of fulfillment via the opportunity to change a great many lives for the better. I’ve heard before that teaching is the best job for changing the most lives, and I believe this. I want to inspire my students to be the best people that they can possibly be, both in the present and in the future.

I see far too many burnt-out teachers (perhaps because I’ve grown up around teachers my whole life) and my biggest fear is becoming one of them. My hope is that my own unique experiences, positive outlook, and high-quality post-secondary education will help me bring a fresh perspective to whatever school district I join. I want to be the teacher whose classroom is buzzing with positive energy, not the teacher whose classroom feels like a prison. I strongly believe that the teacher’s attitude has not only a great influence over her students’ attitudes, but also those of her colleagues, and I want to bring a positive attitude with me to work each and every day.

I won’t lie, the burnt-out teachers scare me, and as much as I believe that I have what it takes to rise above the burn-out, I still fear it. The extra stress that teachers face that comes with standards-based learning and high-stakes testing makes the job even harder than it already is, and I understand how frustration can arise. I am also afraid of becoming too emotionally invested in the lives of my students, which is another factor that can lead to burn-out. *You can’t save them all,* is what we are always told as future educators, but as someone who has always been highly empathetic to the point of “taking on” other people’s feelings, I realize that I am at a greater risk of facing frustration and sadness than someone who is better able to separate their emotions from those of others. I also understand how empathy can be a wonderful gift to have, however, especially as a teacher, and I would rather be “too empathetic” than not empathetic at all. I just need to be able to find balance, which brings me to one of the biggest questions I have regarding the profession: how do I find this balance, and how can I most effectively help as many students in need as I can without falling victim to burn-out? This is a question that I hope to explore further in my time as an education major and as a young teacher.